

THE INFLUENCE OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION ON AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF  
SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS SURROUNDING THE WILD HORSE AND BURRO  
CONTROVERSY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND INNOVATION

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MASTER OF SCIENCE

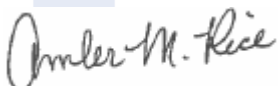
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As members of the Master's Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by *Jamie DeConcini*, titled *The Influence of Written Composition on Audience Perception of Social Media Posts Surrounding the Wild Horse and Burro Controversy* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Master's Degree.

  
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### **Abstract**

The central research question that guided this study was: how does the composition of written educational content on Facebook influence public perception of information regarding the management of wild horses and burros? This research was conducted using content analysis to examine the Facebook posts of six organizations communicating about the wild horse and burro controversy and 8,295 comments made by individuals to the organization's posts. There were five major themes that emerged from the data: organization's posts, audience discussion of the issue, organization-audience interactions, commenter demographics, and misinformation concerns. These themes provide insight into how organizations and individuals are communicating about the wild horse and burro controversy using social media and illuminate opportunities for further research into social media communications. Recommendations for practice include: supplying necessary information to social media instead of relying on the audience to click links, keeping the perceived-cost and investment of requested audience participation low to encourage activism, and strategic planning regarding the frequency and types of post to maximize audience engagement.

Keywords: Wild Horse and Burro; Social Media; Facebook; Written Communication

## Introduction

Social media platforms, traditionally a landscape for interpersonal connection and entertainment, have been increasingly used to disseminate and discuss information and current events by the public (Waggler & Cannon, 2015). One of the most widely used social media platforms is Facebook, with 69% of U.S. adults having used the platform at least once (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). At the end of 2018, Facebook reported 2.32 billion monthly active members, with 74% of Facebook users visiting the site at least once a day (Chen, 2019). Of all the social media platforms, Facebook is the largest news source, with 43% of U.S. adults receiving news through the site (Gramlich, 2019). As audiences shift towards utilizing social media as a primary source for both entertainment and news, interest in traditional news sources, such as newspapers and television news programs, have declined (Stroud, 2011). Social media usage is predicted to grow exponentially as internet access continues to expand globally (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), which could also lead to more individuals relying on social media as their primary source for news.

However, not all information found on social media is considered credible. The 2016 U.S. presidential election brought the rise of “fake news”, which is the dispersion of deliberately false information, typically to shape political opinions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The “fake news” phenomenon became so widespread that both Google and Facebook announced new policies to prevent “fake news” sources from receiving advertising revenue (Wingfield et al., 2016). The rise of fake news is likely connected to the shift in news consumption preferences, as the environment of online news reporting emphasizes speed and deemphasizes fact verification (Chen et al., 2015). “Fake news” and misinformation are not solely limited to political campaigns, it can affect nearly any industry, including agriculture (Pratley, 2018). According to the American Association for Agricultural Education’s (AAAE) National Research Agenda for

2016-2020, misinformation is a complex issue that must be addressed, as misleading information has the potential to drive public perception and impact consumer behavior (Roberts et al., 2016).

Given the total number of individual users on social media platforms, especially those who use social media as a news source, it is not unreasonable to assume that social media platforms also provide an opportunity to present accurate information on agricultural topics and encourage agricultural literacy amongst their audiences. Agricultural literacy is broadly defined as an individual's ability to navigate misinformation and make informed decisions on agricultural issues (Kovar & Ball, 2013). The wild horse and burro controversy, which concerns how wild horses and burros on public lands should be managed (Krysl et al., 1984), is an example of an agriculturally related issue where the opportunity to educate the public on the issue and management options exists.

Despite various organizations, both in and beyond agriculture, adopting social media as an outlet for communication and information dissemination to the public, a gap in communication research still persists (Manuti, 2016). The examination of social media marketing, and its use in formal online education, can be found throughout the literature (Felix et al., 2017; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Lapadat, 2006); however, research connecting the delivery of written communication to the impact on audience perceptions within informal education settings has yet to be explored. This study intends to provide recommendations on how to effectively compose written information delivered on social media so it is accurately perceived by the audience, through the examination of Facebook posts relating to the management of wild horses and burros, a current agriculture issue that is widely discussed and debated on social media.

## **Purpose of the Study and Central Research Question**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the effect different styles of written composition and communication have on audience perceptions of the wild horse and burro controversy through a content analysis of six organizations on Facebook concerned with the management of wild horses and burros, with attention to both organization posts and audience comments. The central research question that guided this study was: How does the composition of written educational content on Facebook influence public perception of information regarding the management of wild horses and burros?

## **Need for the Study**

Information posted on social media platforms on current issues is more likely to be inaccurate because the vetting process for information inclusion is often nonexistent or much less rigorous when compared to traditional news sources (Mergel, 2013). Misinformation of the public through social media, specifically as it relates to agriculture, can lead to devastating impacts on consumers' overall agricultural literacy (Roberts et al., 2016). Consumers drive a large portion of the agricultural industry and their knowledge about agriculture, or lack thereof, can result in changes in public perception and consumer purchasing behavior (Roberts et al., 2016). Due to the potential negative impacts of inaccurate information, it is increasingly important that information posted on social media concerning agricultural topics, such as the wild horse and burro controversy, is accurate and well-presented. In addition to the information being accurate, social media posts must also be strategic in length, framing, and requests for further action (Lee, 2014; Lee & Hsieh 2013; Wagner et al., 2017) Alternatively, social media provides opportunities for organizations with an agriculturally related focus, to educate the general public on current issues and practices. This study aims to explore ways organizations,

such as nonprofits and government agencies, are framing issues regarding the wild horse and burro controversy as well as the effect these approaches have on audience perception of the issue. This can lead to recommendations on how agricultural organizations can most effectively frame information to promote agricultural literacy to their audiences.

## **Literature Review**

### **Effective Communication**

Tubbs & Moss (2006) describe effective communication as “when the stimulus as initiated and intended by the sender, or source, corresponds closely to the stimulus as it is perceived and responded to by the receiver” (p. 24). Betts (2009) describes communication issues as being lost in translation, which occurs when “misinterpretation or communication breakdown of the message or stimuli between the sender/receiver (communicator 1) and the receiver sender (communicator 2)” (p. 3). Betts (2009) found that the phenomenon of a communicator becoming lost in translation can have a negative effect in online education. From Tubbs & Moss’ (2006) definition of effective communication, it can be inferred that ineffective communication occurs when the message is not received as the sender intended. According to Telg & Irani (2012), the possibility of misinterpretation exists in both verbal and written communication but is greater in written communication. These viewpoints illustrate the importance of the intended message reaching the receiver as accurately as possible and the consequences when they do not.

One organization which addresses communication of agricultural concepts to the public is Cooperative Extension. Garcia et al. (2016) compiled a tool kit of best practices for Extension professionals using social media including how often to post, how to interact with followers, what time of day to post, and when to share content. However, what to write is only mentioned



once, with the instruction being to use empirical language such as “research shows” in social media posts (Garcia et al., 2016). The Animal Agriculture Alliance (n.d.) compiled a similar guide on how to use social media to promote accurate information on agriculture, but lacks information on how to write effectively, simply urging members to “make your voice heard” and “tell your side of the story”. While research has been conducted on effective writing and effective social media strategies, a need for additional research on effective writing within the context of social media and agriculture still exists.

### **Agricultural Literacy**

A large challenge facing the agriculture today is that only 11% of the population are directly involved in agriculture or a related industry (Kassel, 2018). Yet, nearly the entire U.S. population consumes goods, like food and fiber, which are a direct product of the agriculture industry. This disconnect between producers and consumers also presents a potential gap in agricultural literacy. Agricultural literacy is described by Kovar & Ball (2013) as:

An agriculturally literate population is able to see beyond emotional pleas and make informed decisions on [agricultural] these issues. A society with an understanding of agriculture and current economic, social, and environmental impacts could lessen current challenges facing agriculture through good decision making along with providing the necessary support (p. 167-168).

When consumers of agriculture are not agriculturally literate, misinterpretations can occur and may influence the consumer’s perception of modern agricultural practices (Specht et al., 2014). A population which is not agriculturally literate may also be more prone to believe misinformation regarding agriculture. This misinterpretation and belief of misinformation has the potential to alter public perception, which can in turn impact the agricultural market (Roberts et

al., 2016). Correcting misinformation and beliefs associated with misinformation can be challenging, as Cook & Lewandowsky (2012) state “when you debunk a myth, you create a gap in the person’s mind. To be effective, your debunking must fill that gap” (p. 5). Based on this research, effective communication of information on social media will likely have to accommodate both audiences that are unfamiliar with in the topic and audiences who have been misinformed.

### **Wild Horse and Burro Controversy**

This research examined how the composition of written information on Facebook influences audience perceptions of the information through the exploration of social media posts made regarding the wild horse and burro controversy. Wild horses and burros are an introduced species which can be found in the Western U.S. and are legally protected by the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act (WFRHBA) of 1971 (Garrott, 2018). The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is tasked with controlling the herds, which can grow at a rate of 20% annually if left unmanaged, and maintaining an ecological balance (BLM, 2019). It was estimated that 82,000 wild horses and burros were living on 26.9 million acres of public land across California, Oregon, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, South Dakota, Arizona, and Texas in 2018 (BLM, 2019). The growing population of wild horses and burros often overlaps with other interests, including cattle grazing allotments on public land (Krysl et al., 1984).

Numerous methods are available to control the population of wild horses. These methods include rounding up horses for disposal, to be held in government-maintained facilities or to be sold to private parties, and by administering birth control to wild herds (Garrott, 2018). Many opinions exist on how wild horses and burros should be managed, ranging from leaving them

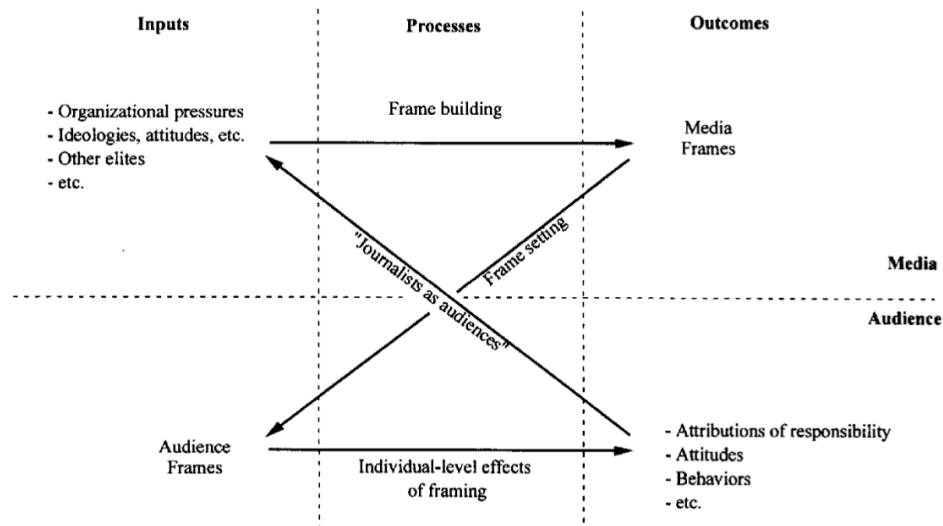
completely untouched to drastically reducing the populations (Scasta et al., 2018). The multiplicity of opinions, varying levels of public knowledge, and the opportunity to educate make this a suitable topic to examine.

### Theoretical Framework

Framing as a Theory of Media Effects was constructed by Dietram Scheufele (1999) to clarify fragmented approaches to framing political messages and to compose a comprehensive framing model (Figure 1). Broadly, framing is how individuals and groups perceive, organize, and communicate about information. Scheufele (1999) operationalizes framing based on social constructivism, a process concerning how individuals construct knowledge to make sense of their environment (Creswell, 2018), and discusses two major frames: media frames and individual frames.

**Figure 1**

*Scheufele's (1999) Process Model of Framing Research*



Scheufele (1999) discusses how the media actively sets frames of reference that recipients then use to interpret and discuss events. This frame setting performed by the media is referred to as media frames. This is the process by which the media provides audiences with meaning by which to interpret events or information, suggesting the essence of the issue to viewers. Additionally, media frames can allow authors to quickly identify and package information so it can be efficiently relayed. Media frames also consider the author's conscious and unconscious intents, which in turn influences how recipients perceive the information being read. Understanding media frames is a vital component in unpacking how information is perceived by audiences. However, to fully understand framing, individual frames must also be considered.

Individual frames, also referred to as audience frames, are independent of media frames and help explain how individuals process the same information differently based off individualized experiences, ideas, and beliefs (Scheufele, 1999). Scheufele (1999) identifies two types of individual frames which influence how an individual processes information: global, long-term political frames and short term, issue related frames. Global, long-term political frames have been found to have a limited influence on the perception and interpretation of issues; whereas short term, issue related frames have a significant impact on an individual's perception, organization, and interpretation of information as well as on their ability to draw inferences.

Scheufele (1999) also introduces research conducted by Kosicki and McLeod (1990) which describes three ways information is processed by individuals, a concept which adds dimension to individual frames. The first type of processing is active processing, where the individual seeks out additional sources of information based on a belief that the mass-media

account is incomplete or biased. Next are reflective integrators, individuals who ponder or discuss information gleaned from media to understand what they learned. Third are selective scanners, individuals who use media purely to seek information they find relevant and skim over irrelevant or uninteresting content. Selective scanning is a concept that will be of interest in this research as consumption of social media is a process of selective scanning, scrolling past content and advertisements which are not interesting or applicable, to reach content which the viewer finds worthy of reading or viewing.

Figure 1 illustrates the process by which frames impact media from the perspective of media and individual/audience. From the media side, influence on the author, such as organizational pressure, influence the process of writing and frame building which then influences the media frame. For audience, the progression is flipped, and audience frames are the input which determine the individual-level effect of framing with the outcome including attitude and behaviors on a topic. There are two items which do not travel linearly on the image. First, the outcome of media's process of framing, media frames, which influence audience frames. Next, the outcome of audiences' process of framing, attitudes and beliefs, which influence the first step of media framing as the writer must take their audiences' attitudes and beliefs into account on future pieces. Figure 1 represents framing as a cyclical process where media frames influence individual frames and vice versa. For example, a journalist's writing is impacted by the organization for which they are writing, the professional expectations of the written format, and the expectations of their readers. Once the article is published, readers bring their own individualized background, viewpoint, and beliefs which impact how they view and understand the journalist's writing. This example shows how media frames, represented by the journalist, and individual frames, represented by the reader, shape perception and impact each other.

This framework was utilized in this study to understand the impact which the author has on the audience as well as the impact the audience, organization, and personal beliefs have on the author. Scheufele's (1999) focus when creating this framework was political communication. Issues like those surrounding the management of wild horses and burros are interconnected with government agencies like the BLM and acts such as the WFRHBA of 1971. Therefore, Scheufele's (1999) theoretical framework on framing for political communication are appropriate to extend to agricultural topics like the management of wild horses and burros.

### **Methods**

This research was conducted using content analysis to identify patterns which emerge amongst the Facebook posts of organizations concerned with the wild horse and burro controversy and those reacting, in the form of comments, to these posts. Lauri and Kyngäs (2005) suggest using inductive content analysis when prior knowledge of the phenomenon is limited. Therefore, because the influence of written communication delivered via social media on audience perception of a topic is still an emerging area of research, an inductive approach was chosen. In addition to choosing an inductive versus deductive approach, researchers using content analysis also must determine whether manifest analysis or latent analysis is most appropriate (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Manifest analysis focuses on what was explicitly communicated in the text, while latent analysis focuses on interpretation and the discovery of underlying meaning (Bengtsson, 2016). As this study concerns written composition viewed through Scheufele's (1999) framework of media and individual frames, manifest analysis was selected as the preferred lens of analysis. A manifest analysis was preferable in this case as it stays grounded in the original text to a higher degree than latent analysis (Bengtsson, 2016).

## **Description of Social Media Site**

Facebook was chosen as an ideal site for this study due to its widespread use and prevalence of text-based communication. Facebook is the largest social media platform in the world, with 2.4 billion users and 69% of U.S. adults having used Facebook at least once (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Facebook is also unique in that a wide age-range is active on the platform. Users aged 13-65+ are well-represented on the Facebook, with a majority being 13-64 year-olds and 41% of those aged 65+ on platform (West, 2019). Other widely popular social media sites include YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (Gramlich, 2019). However, each of these social media sites has features which make them less ideal candidates for this study. Twitter limits users to 280 characters while Instagram and YouTube favor images and photos respectively over text-based communication. In a study examining text-based communication, Bull et al. (2008) also identified Facebook as an important source of online text-based communication, in addition to email and cell-phone texting. Additionally, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter all have fewer users than Facebook, with 1.9 billion, 1 billion and 329.5 million users respectively (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

## **Epistemology**

Social constructivism was used as the epistemological lens of this study. According to Adams (2006), social constructivism is a process whereby individuals actively construct knowledge to make sense of their environment. Creswell (2018) acknowledges that during this process of actively constructing knowledge, individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. Due to the multiplicity of individualized views, it is important for researchers using a social constructivist lens to inductively develop patterns based on the words of the participants (Creswell, 2018). Grounding this study in social constructivism allows me as the researcher to

observe how organizations communicating on Facebook about the wild horse and burro controversy use language to construct and communicate their reality (Andrews, 2012).

### **Positionality**

It is important that I disclose my positionality to discuss my expertise and address any biases I may have (Creswell, 2018). As an undergraduate student, I took English, technical writing, and effective communication courses. These courses have helped to shape my view on what constitutes effective written communication. An additional experience which contributed to this interest was that my grandfather worked for a newspaper for 48 years, spending much of that time writing the local wildlife and hunting column. Additionally, I have horse-related experience. I have been riding for fourteen years, compete regularly in the equestrian sport of dressage, completed an internship at a therapeutic horseback riding facility, and have owned my own horses for seven years. My agriculturally related undergraduate degree has also exposed me to viewpoints which may oppose wild horses and burros. For example, I have interacted with individuals who graze cattle on public land, an activity which many wild horse and burro advocates feel is detrimental. I feel these experiences allow me the ability to see the wild horse and burro controversy from several viewpoints. However, I have attempted to bracket these experiences to let the findings from the data emerge organically (Creswell, 2018).

### **Cases and Data Collection**

This document analysis gained its data from six organizations which post about the wild horse and burro controversy on the social media platform Facebook. These organizations, reported under pseudonyms, include: American Wild Horse Advocates (AWHA), Government Horse and Burro Adoptions (GHBA), Wild Horse Information Center (WHIC), Protecting America's Wild Horses (PAWH), Western Wild Horse Sanctuary (WWHS), and the Local Horse



Management Association (LHMA). The sample size was determined based on Graneheim & Lundman's (2004) suggestion that the unit of analysis should be "large enough to be considered a whole and small enough to be possible to keep in mind as a context for the meaning unit" (p. 106).

To eliminate bias stemming from Facebook's algorithm, such as Facebook friends on a personal profile interacting with organizations of interest, a new Facebook profile was created for data collection. To find organizations, search terms including wild, horse, burro, management, advocate, control, sterilization, roundup, and BLM were entered on Facebook's search bar and the "pages" tab was selected. The search yielded organizations who are concerned with the wild horse and burro controversy.

The time frame of Facebook posts included in this study was from September 29, 2019 to November 30, 2019. This timeframe represents a 30-day period before and after the October 29-31, 2019 meeting of the BLM's National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board. The board members represent various interest groups related to the management of wild horses and burros and meet one to two times annually to discuss related issues and advise the BLM (BLM, 2019). While the management of wild horses and burros is a topic which is discussed on Facebook year-round, the meeting of the BLM's National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board generated further discussion and thus made this an ideal timeframe to examine how organizations and individuals are using Facebook to discuss their positions and concerns.

Organizations were then narrowed down based on frequency of posts, type of posts, and positionality. For frequency, organizations who appeared to be active were selected and pages which had not been active in months were omitted from consideration. For a page to be considered active, the organization must have posted at least once weekly during the October 29-

31, 2019 timeframe. Since this study is concerned with written communication, the type of post also had to be considered. Organizations whose posts contained text were chosen over those who only posted videos or photos with limited text to analyze. This does not mean that posts with photos or links were excluded from consideration, but they had to have additional written content which matched the search terms. Positionality was also considered in choosing organizations, with the goal of selecting organizations with a variety of stances regarding the wild horse and burro controversy. While most organizations posting to Facebook regarding the wild horse and burro controversy believed that wild horses and burros should be left alone or minimally managed, organizations advocating for varying levels of management were also included. Table 1 displays an overview of the organizations sampled.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Six Facebook Organizations Sampled*

Organization	Organization Type	Positionality*
American Wild Horse Advocates	501C3 nonprofit	Oppose intervention`
Government Horse and Burro Adoptions	Government agency	Supports management
Wild Horse Information Center	501C3 nonprofit	Oppose intervention
Protecting America's Wild Horses	501C3 nonprofit	Oppose intervention
Western Wild Horse Sanctuary	501C3 nonprofit and wild horse sanctuary	Supports contraception
Local Horse Management Association	501C3 nonprofit which conducts research, performs rescues, and supports local herds.	Supports contraception

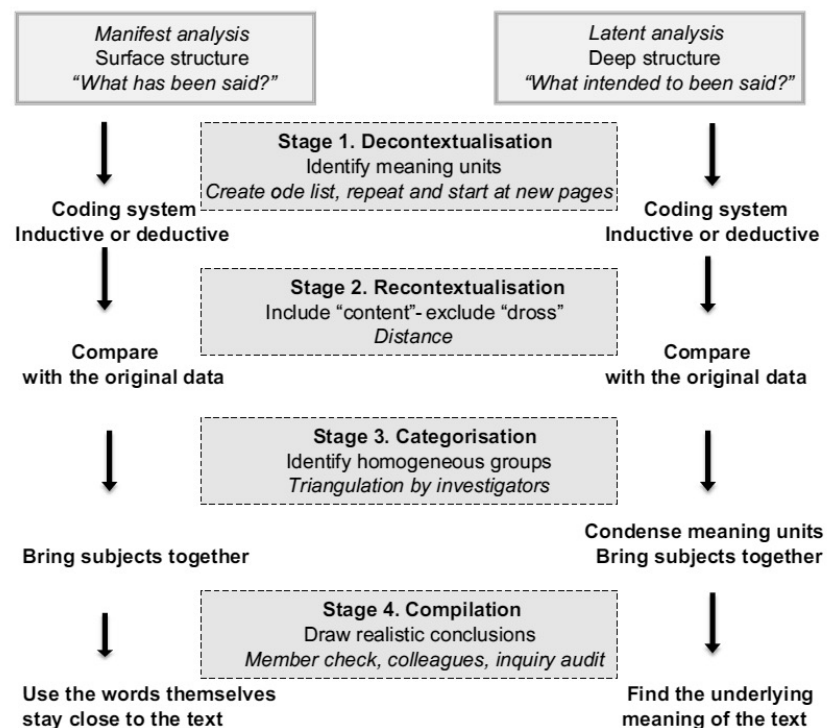
\*\*Positionality determined by reading the organization's mission statements.

## Data Analysis

Bengtsson's (2016) approach to content analysis was utilized in this study. This approach involves four stages: decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation (Bengtsson, 2016). Figure 2 outlines Bengtsson's (2016) four stages of content analysis.

**Figure 2**

*Bengtsson's (2016) Approach to Content Analysis*



The first stage, decontextualization, requires the researchers familiarize themselves with the data. Bengtsson (2016) states that this familiarization with the data is required for researchers to deconstruct the data into meaning units. A meaning unit is a group of words or phrases which relate to the same central meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). The process of labeling emerging meaning units is referred to by Berg (2007) as the open coding process. This study considered two data sets: the Facebook posts published by organizations concerned with the wild horse and burro controversy and the comments on each post. I performed decontextualization in

this study by reading each post and the accompanying comments to acquaint myself with the data. During this process of familiarization, I also began open coding by recording meaning units inductively as they emerged in the posts and comments. Coding regarding the posts and comments remained separate as codes relating to the post informed me on how organizations posting regarding the wild horse and burro controversy frame their information. Coding the comments focused on how the audience perceived the information contained within the post. Nvivo 12 was used as the data management software for coding all Facebook posts and comments.

Bengtsson's (2016) second step, recontextualization, requires researchers reexamine the documents alongside the list of meaning units. After this reexamination is completed, text which does not classify as under meaning units are identified. If the text contributes to the research question, it should be included. If the text does not contribute towards addressing the research question, it is classified as "dross" and is excluded (Bengtsson, 2016). I achieved recontextualization by reviewing the meaning units which emerged during decontextualization, ensuring no meaning units were overlooked, and by eliminating information which did not correspond with the aim of my study. After performing decontextualization and recontextualization, I had 22,002 individual codes representing 391 meaning units.

The third step of Bengtsson's (2016) approach to content analysis is categorization and involves condensing meaning units and then compiling them into categories. Graneheim & Lundman (2003) describe a category as "a group of content that shares a commonality" and that "categories must be exhaustive and mutually exclusive" (p. 107). To perform contextualization in my study I first shortened my meaning units while still retaining the content of the units. Then, I placed the meaning units into 17 larger categories which addressed the topic of my study. The

broad subjects addressed were the composition of written social media posts, the perception of the audience, and the interactions between the organizations and audience.

Bengtsson's (2016) fourth and final step when conducting content analysis is called compilation. Compilation involves analyzing and compiling the data for presentation while remaining neutral and objective (Bengtsson, 2016). This stage is demonstrated in the findings of the study and is represented through tables and participant quotes.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was addressed in this study by considering dependability, credibility, and transferability (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). First, dependability refers to the "stability of data over time and under different conditions" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 2). This is a strength of content analysis as documents are non-reactive, meaning they are not affected by the research process (Bowen, 2009). Additionally, posts on Facebook are available indefinitely and will only disappear if the organization that authored the post deletes it. Next, credibility is achieved by ensuring that "those participating in research are identified and described accurately" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 2). According to Bengtsson (2016), when using content analysis, researchers must consider their "pre-understanding" to minimize bias. I achieved credibility in this study by sharing my positionality and by actively bracketing my positionality to prevent bias and remain objective during data collection and analysis. The final element of trustworthiness as defined by Graneheim and Lundman (2003) is transferability, which is described as "the extent to which findings can be transferred to other settings or groups" (Polit & Hungler, 1999, p. 717). To facilitate transferability, I have explained the process of data collection and analysis in depth and followed Bowen's (2009) approach to content analysis.

Trustworthiness was also addressed by achieving saturation in the number of posts examined. Saturation aids researchers in deciding when to stop sampling the groups being studied because no additional data significant enough to alter existing categories is found (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). To reach the point of saturation, the researcher must seek out groups which could provide additional diversity to the data to ensure the data is based on the widest possible range (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). In this study, ensuring saturation began during data collection by examining a broader range of Facebook organizations than were included in the study. This aided in reaching saturation as it helped to ensure that the organizations chosen were present, known to those involved in the issue, and represented a variety of positionalities. The process continued after data analysis, where the comments from Facebook groups which were not included were re-examined to determine if they contained any significant new data. No significant new data was found, so saturation was achieved.

### **Limitations**

It is important to recognize the limitations which impacted this study. First, the study was limited to public Facebook pages and excluded private groups which require the group's approval to access. However, due to these restrictions, it is likely that most organizations will choose to post publicly to reach a wider audience rather than posting in a group where the content is restricted to a much smaller audience. A second limitation of this study is that permission was required to use commenter's Facebook quotes. Due to this limitation, the number of potential quotes to demonstrate each category and subcategory was limited. Additionally, the finite amount of time and single researcher analyzing data limited the number of organizations and Facebook posts which could be analyzed. To mitigate this limitation, the most active organizations communicating about the wild horse and burro controversy were selected. To

ensure the most suitable organizations were selected, time was dedicated to examining Facebook to compile a list of organizations communicating about the issue and examine possible organization's Facebook pages to determine the organization's level of activity. While steps were taken to mitigate this limitation, the researcher acknowledges that human error is always a possibility.

## **Findings**

Five major themes emerged from the data after examining the 136 Facebook posts and 8,295 comments across six organizations included in the study. The themes included: organization's posts, audience discussion of the issue, organization-audience interactions, commenter demographics, and misinformation concerns. Three of the themes were developed based on Scheufele's (1999) framework which outlines media frames (represented by the organizations) and audience frames (represented by the commenters). The other two themes, including commenter demographics and concerns regarding misinformation, emerged inductively during data analysis. Together, these five themes represent the holistic interaction and communication between organizations and individuals on Facebook regarding the wild horse and burro controversy.

### **Organization's Posts**

The six organizations included in this study were: AWhA, GHBA, WHIC, PAWH, WWHS, and LHMA. Each organization varied in the number of posts, responses, type of responses, and posting style. This variation is represented in Table 2, which shows the number of total comments an organization received and the average number of comments per post, and Table 3, which shows the topics most frequently discussed by the organizations.

**Table 2***Organizational Post and Comment Distribution*

Organization	Posts Included	Percentage of Total Posts *	Total Number of Comments	Average Number of Comments Per Post **
American Wild Horse Advocates	29	21.32%	3,515	121
Government Horse and Burro Adoptions	15	11.02%	443	30
Wild Horse Information Center	16	11.76%	1,564	98
Protecting America's Wild Horses	40	29.41%	1,000	25
Western Wild Horse Sanctuary	21	15.44%	310	15
Local Horse Management Association	15	11.02%	1,463	99

\* Rounded to nearest hundredth

\*\*Rounded to the nearest whole number

AWHA elicited the highest response rate, with an average of 121 comments in the 29 included posts. The organization's most common posting method was posting a brief summary, approximately 3 sentences, with a link for more information and an image. The topic of the posts ranged from roundup reports, which detail the number of horses captured and any fatalities, to details on lawsuits the organization has launched and donation requests. The organization's longest posts were most frequently donation requests. AWAH communicates that the organization is opposed to most forms of management which other groups, including WWHS, have deemed to be humane. However, the organization finds some methods of fertility control of wild horses acceptable. While AWAH's posts receive many comments from followers, the comments are typically brief and there are many emotional responses.



LHMA received the second-highest number of comments, averaging 99 comments in the 15 included posts. Most of LHMA's posts are very detailed, with many exceeding 10 paragraphs; however, some posts are shorter, like those that contain a video produced by a group or that are sharing a news article. The longer posts provided a detailed overview of issues facing local wild horses, what parties were involved, what the organization was doing to solve the issue, and how followers could help (if applicable). On these posts, links were either not provided or were supplemental, all information required to develop an understanding of the issue from the organization's viewpoint was included in the Facebook post. LHMA's posts state that the organization wants to humanely maintain a specific population of wild horses by using fertility control, providing safe road crossings, and by removing and euthanizing horses when necessary. Their goal is collectively achieved through the community's financial support and by volunteers. LHMA's detailed posts led to more positive, in-depth comments compared to other organizations. Many commenters thanked the LHMA for their work related to the issue.

WHIC received an average of 98 comments across 16 included posts. Like AWWA, WHIC's posts were frequently brief, 2 sentences to 2 paragraphs, with an accompanying link and photo. WHIC also posted roundup reports, mining reform, the organization's active lawsuits, and donation requests. WHIC communicates through their posts that they disagree with roundups and hope for a humane, on-range solution to management. Comments to WHIC, like LHMA, tended to be short and related to negative emotions or negative views on roundups.

GHBA received an average of 30 comments across 15 included posts. The page posts about opportunities to adopt wild horses and burros through adoption events around the country as well through permanent facilities. The posts are typically two to three paragraphs long, containing details about upcoming adoption events. Posts also contain photos, including flyers

for the event and photos of adoptable horses and burros. Comments to the GHBA's posts are from interested adopters and those who oppose the GHBA. Comments are split between inquiries about adopting and debates about wild horse and burro management strategies.

PAWH averaged 25 comments over 40 posts, the highest number of posts included from a single organization. PAWH's posts are long, typically exceeding 5 paragraphs. The posts convey PAWH's positionality on the management of wild horses and burros, expressing a goal of increasing the number of horses and burros on public lands by releasing captive horses. PAWH claims that wild horses have ecological benefits, such as reducing wildfires by eating specific types of forage. The organization also shares some adoption information, roundup reports, and their desire to reduce or eliminate grazing permits on public lands. In addition to the information provided on posts, PAWH also provides links to their website, posts photos with each post, and uses hashtags in their posts. Comments to PAWH frequently disagree with the government's management strategy and convey resulting negative emotions. Comments to PAWH may be lower due to the high frequency of posts which could cause the audience to feel overwhelmed.

The organization with the fewest comments was WWHS. WWHS is a wild horse and burro sanctuary and frequently posts medium length posts, about 3-5 paragraphs. The posts concern horses and burros in WWHS's care, animals available for sponsorship, fertility control measures, and news about the SAFE act, which would ban horse slaughter in the U.S. and prevent U.S. horses from being transported to foreign slaughterhouses. While the number of comments to WWHS's posts are less than other organizations sampled, the comments tend to be much longer and were more likely to lead to discussion between commenters and with the organization.

**Table 3***Organizational Posting Patterns*

Description of Meaning Unit	Number of Posts*
Adoption Event	18
Call to Action	33
Donation Request	14
Fertility Control Negative	10
Link Action	16
Link Own Website	87
Path Forward Mentioned	13
Photo of Adoptable Horses or Burros	15
Photo Helicopter	10
Photo Roundup	31
Photo Wild Horses	40
Release Captive Horses	19
Roundup Negative	27
Roundup News	16
Roundup Report	15
Slaughter Mentioned	22
Taxpayers Mentioned	10
Uses Hashtag	29

\* Only meaning units appearing in ten or more organization posts are included in this table.

**Audience Discussion of the Issue**

One of the most emergent themes when examining Facebook communications surrounding the wild horse and burro controversy was the impact and involvement of the audience. The audience is widely involved in this issue, with an average of 62 comments per Facebook post included in the study. Additionally, the audience is impactful as their participation has the potential to shape how organizations choose to deliver their messages. The audience is also essential to all the organizations, as the organizations depend on the audience to tell others about the cause, contribute financially, or by sponsoring and adopting a wild horse or burro. The audience discussions can be grouped into four subthemes, which include: action-oriented responses, emotional responses, government responses, and management-related responses.

### *Action-Oriented Responses*

One subtheme which emerged from the audience's discussion of the issue were comments related to action, with 7.57% of comments referencing action in some way. More specifically, commenters either reported action that they had personally taken or discussed action that should be taken by other individuals, the organization, or other regulatory agencies. Of the 628 action-oriented comments 54.3% reported actions taken and 45.7% referenced action that should be taken related to the wild horse and burro controversy. Table 4 shows the comments categorized as being action-oriented.

Comments which were categorized as reporting actions taken included instances where commenters state they have shared the organizations posts, donated to the organization, or report other cause-related actions they have taken. For example, commenter Alex shared the following on the post of an organization which opposes intervention: "I commented on the page and [am] waiting for approval ... I commented on the BLM Link as well". In this example, Alex is sharing action she had already taken. Comments relating to action taken occurred both in response to a request for action by the posting organization as well as comments reporting action taken independent of the posting organizations' recommendations.

Comments which were categorized as discussing action which should be taken included calling the organization to action, recommendations to contact the U.S. president or take legal action, calls to action independent of the organization's post, supporting the organization's call to action, and urging other commenters to act. Alex's comment to an organization opposing intervention's post also supported the organization's call to action. After stating, "I commented on the page and [am] waiting for approval", Alex urges others to act by saying "everyone should

do the same”. In this example, Alex both reports action she had taken and recommends action that her fellow commenters should take.

**Table 4**

*Action-Oriented Comments Across Six Organizations*

Category	Description of Meaning Unit *	Number of Posts Meaning Units Appeared in	Number of Comments the Meaning Unit Appeared in
Action Taken	C: Donated to Organization	12	76
	C: Shared Post	56	108
	C: Reports Personal Action Taken	51	117
	R: Reports Personal Action Taken	24	40
Action Should be Taken	C: Call to Action for Organization	3	5
	C: Contact President	5	5
	C: Independent Call to Action	60	185
	C: Legal Action	25	33
	C: Supports Organization's Call to Action	20	26
	R: Legal Action	11	16
	R: Urge Commenter to Action	12	17

\* C stands for a direct comment while R stands for response or reply to another comment

***Emotional Responses***

The next subtheme which emerged from the audience's discussion of the issue were comments that included emotional responses. Emotional responses accounted for 23.06% of all comments included in the study, with responses being further categorized into positive or negative responses. Negative responses included those expressing emotions such as anger, frustration, or sadness, and positive reactions included expressions of happiness and approval. It is also important to note that comments were not limited to text, many comments expressed

emotion using visuals like emoticons (e.g. smiling face or frowning face), stickers (e.g. faces or characters), and GIFs (i.e. short animated images). Table 5 shows each meaning unit which was categorized as being related to negative or positive emotional responses.

The largest category of emotional responses was negative emotional responses. Negative emotional responses accounted for 64.72% of all emotional responses. Negative emotional responses included text and visuals which expressed a negative emotion such as sadness, anger, disappointment, and frustration. Negative emotions were expressed by commenters Linda, Susan, and Ellie. Linda, who commented on the post of an organization which supports contraception, expressed her sadness by saying “It is soo sad when a common sense approach to helping wildlife is completely ignored”. Susan and Ellie both commented on the posts of organizations which oppose intervention. Susan expressed her anger by commenting “Watching in disbelief still at this cruelty to innocent iconic wild horses. Very angry in CANADA”. Ellie expressed sadness and used several common terms when she commented “Heartbreaking greed and slaughter”. These comments provide an example on how commenters across three of the six included organizations are communicating their negative emotions.

Ellie’s comment also surfaced several terms which are commonly used during the audience’s discussion of the issue. These terms, which commonly appear in expressions of emotion as well as other comments, include abuse, criminal, cruel, evil, greed, and slaughter. Additionally, mentions of taxpayers and the term “wild and free” also emerged as a pattern. One or more commonly used term appeared in 12.99% of comments.

Positive emotional responses accounted for 35.28% of total emotional responses. Positive emotional responses included text and visuals which expressed a positive emotion such as happiness, hopefulness, gratitude, thanks, and excitement. Commenter Sally expressed a positive

emotional reaction to a group which supports management by saying “Yay so excited to see the gentled yearlings in this event! Hoping to see more of that and hopefully all horses and burros get great homes!”. Additional positive emotional responses which appeared frequently included commenters thanking the organization for their work or actions. This is illustrated in Paige’s comment to the post of an organization which supports contraception: “Thank you for the much needed (apparently) explanation to the community at large about the process you follow to make difficult decisions”. A variety of positive emotional responses were expressed by commenters. Jessica, who also commented on a page which supports contraception, expressed pride by saying “Great status report! Proud of what this group does ...”. These comments provide examples of the variety of ways commenters expressed positive emotions.

**Table 5**

*Commenter’s Emotional Responses Across Six Organizations*

Category	Description of Meaning Unit *	Number of Posts Meaning Units Appeared in	Number of Comments the Meaning Unit Appeared in
Negative Emotions	C: Emotional Response Negative	74	1,043
	C: Expresses Frustration	39	94
	R: Emotional Response Negative	31	77
	R: Expresses Frustration	15	24
Positive Emotions	C: Emotional Response Positive	29	130
	C: Thanks Organization	55	527
	R: Emotional Response Positive	2	2
	R: Thanks Organization	15	16

\*C stands for a direct comment while R stands for response or reply to another comment

### ***Government Responses***

Comments which related to the government and the government's involvement in the wild horse and burro controversy was another subtheme which emerged from the audience's discussion of the issue. Comments classified as government responses include opinions on the BLM and government, and comments which mention the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Advisory board, acts or proposed acts (like the 1971 WFRHBA and SAFE Act), and the president. Comments relating to the government accounted for 13.32% of total responses. Table 6 shows each meaning unit which was categorized as a government response.

The largest group of government related responses were comments expressing a negative opinion of the BLM. Negative opinions of the BLM made up 46.78% of total government-related responses. Negative opinions of the BLM typically expressed disagreement with the Bureau's approach to management or simply expressed dislike. Alex's comment, on a group which opposes intervention, provides an example of a negative comment expressing disagreement with the BLM's approach to management: "The BLM has refused to do a census and they have no idea what the actual population of wild horses actually is but will claim that they are overpopulated and "excess" on a daily basis". Negative comments about the BLM appeared most frequently on the posts of organization's that oppose intervention. The GHBA's posts also had commenters express their disagreement directly, but other commenters were quick to respond in defense of the BLM.

An additional significant finding of government related responses are mentions of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board. While the Advisory Board was not mentioned frequently, representing only about 2.26% of total government responses, the fact that the Advisory Board is being mentioned is significant. This is because the mention of the Advisory



Board by commenters helps to justify the timeframe of data collection surrounding the fall 2019 meeting of the board. Riley's comment to a group which opposes intervention provides an example of a comment which mentions the Advisory Board: "Nevada rep on WHB advisory board to BLM sought an alternative to permanent sterilization, but in the end supported funding research for it". Riley's comment demonstrates both awareness of the Advisory Board and knowledge of specific topics which the Board discussed. While comments which referenced the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board weren't numerous, the presence of these types of comments show that at least a portion of the audience is aware of the Advisory Board and their fall 2019 meeting.

**Table 6***Government Responses Across Six Organizations*

Category	Description of Meaning Unit *	Number of Posts Meaning Units Appeared in	Number of Comments the Meaning Unit Appeared in **
Advisory Board	C: Mentions Advisory Board	13	13
	C: Advisory Board Negative	3	7
	R: Mentions Advisory Board	4	5
BLM Opinions	C: BLM Negative	82	517
	R: BLM Negative	42	101
	R: BLM Positive	6	8
Government Opinions	C: Government Negative	53	167
	R: Government Negative	33	98
Mentions Acts or Proposals	C: Mentions 1971 Act	13	13
	C: Mentions SAFE Act	9	9
	C: Path Forward Negative	5	5
	R: Mentions 1971 Act	11	14
	R: Mentions SAFE Act	6	13
	C: Trump Negative	31	46
President Trump	C: Trump Neutral	7	8
	R: Trump Negative	18	58
	R: Defending Trump	11	15
	R: Trump Neutral	6	8

\* C stands for a direct comment while R stands for response or reply to another comment

\*\* Only meaning units appearing in five or more comments are included in this table

***Management-Related Responses***

An integral part of the wild horse and burro controversy surrounds the multiplicity of potential management options. This was reflected in the audience's discussion of the issue. Comments related to management, which included discussion of the cost of management, fertility control, competing interests, meat consumption, and roundup, represented 15.66% of

comments. Table 7 shows the meaning units which were categorized as management-related responses.

**Table 7**

*Management-Related Responses Across Six Organizations*

Category	Description of Meaning Unit *	Number of Posts Meaning Units Appeared in	Number of Comments the Meaning Unit Appeared in
Cost of Management	C: Cost of Management	8	11
Fertility Control	C: Fertility Control Negative	16	24
	C: Fertility Control Positive	27	93
	R: Fertility Control Negative	10	12
	R: Fertility Control Neutral	5	6
	R: Fertility Control Positive	15	18
	C: Cattle Negative	74	409
Competing Interests	C: Mining Impact	20	29
	C: Oil Impact	24	31
	R: Cattle Negative	53	201
	R: Mining Impact	16	20
	R: Oil Impact	22	38
	C: Go Vegetarian/Vegan	8	8
Meat-Related	C: Boycott Cattle	24	32
	C: Overseas Beef Consumption	2	2
	R: Go Vegan/Vegetarian	5	8
	R: Boycott Cattle	10	16
	R: Overseas Beef Consumption	6	12
	C: Anti Roundup	66	265
Roundup	C: Pro Roundup	3	3
	R: Anti Roundup	32	57
	R: Pro Roundup	3	4

\* C stands for a direct comment while R stands for response or reply to another comment

Competing interests were the most frequently topic related to management, representing 56.47% of total management-related responses. Of these responses, the most frequent was negative mentions of the impact of cattle on public lands, which accounted for 83.79% of competing interest comments. Alex's comment to a group which opposed intervention, provides an example of a comment regarding the perceived impact of cattle: "Cattle hang around water sources causing damage with their cloven hooves damaging streambeds and areas around ponds". A common trend within the anti-cattle argument is individuals stating that horses are either less detrimental or beneficial to the land. Some argue that horses prevent wildfires due to the forage they consume. Jim's comment, also to an organization which opposes intervention, provides an example of this: "No wonder you have wildfires cattle do not eat, travel the same way as horses nor sheep". Other competing interests mentioned include mining, 6.73%, and oil, 9.48%.

The second most frequent comment related to management concerned roundups. Currently, the BLM is rounding up wild horses and burros and putting them up for adoption or in long-term holding pens (BLM, 2020). Roundup was discussed in 25.34% of management-related comments, with 97.87% of roundup related comments referring to roundup negatively. Alex, who commented to an organization which opposes management, states her opinion on roundup by saying: "Removing these horses makes things worse". While Jim's comment, also to an organization which opposes intervention, shows a more emotional side of the anti-roundup argument, stating: "This is beyond horrible how can you look at your children, friends, or my children and tell them we are the ones who slaughter all the horses and there are none for the children to see". Of the 2.13% of comments which regarded roundups positively, not every commenter agreed entirely with the management strategy. Taylor, who commented to an

organization which supports management, expressed her agreement with roundup but disagreement with the approach by saying: “I wish they didn’t use helicopters to round up yes. But mustangs need to be rounded up”. Alex, Jim, and Taylor’s comments provide examples of how commenters are communicating their opinions about roundup and how comments can fall into more than meaning unit.

### **Organization-Audience Interaction**

In some cases, the organizations engaged in conversations with the audience, answering questions and providing clarification. Organization’s comments accounted for 3.24% of total comments. Every organization included in this study posted a comment or reply on at least one occasion, with LHMA commenting the most frequently. Organization-audience interactions can be further categorized into organizational comments and commenter questions; however, it is important to recognize that organization-audience interactions were not limited to organizations answering commenter’s questions. Table 8 shows how organizations and audiences interacted in the comments, while Table 9 shows how frequently each organization responded to commenters.

The organization’s comments are further divided into comments and replies to other commenters. Replies to existing comments were most common, accounting for 92.19% of total comments by the posting organization. Organization’s comments included posting photos, links, and thanking supporters. An example of a direct comment from an organization thanking its supporters is the following, posted by an organization which supports contraception: “Thank you all so very very much, we cannot do what we do best without your support”. In contrast to organization’s direct comments, replies covered a wider variety of topics. Organizational replies included correcting commenters, generally thanking commenters, thanking commenters for donating, and answering commenter’s questions. An example of an organization’s response

which corrected a commenter, posted by an organization which supports contraception, is: “Only 3% of the nation’s beef comes from public lands”. Commenters asked questions in 7.98% of all comments, and organizations did directly address some questions. An example of an organization’s reply to answer a commenter’s question, from an organization which opposes management, is as follows: “It still has yet to be voted on by the full Senate floor to make it into law and that has not been done yet, so there is still hope”. On social media, organizations have the ability to continue the conversation past the initial post. These quotes provide examples of how three organizations are interacting with their audience.

**Table 8***Organization-Audience Interaction*

Category	Description of Meaning Unit	Number of Posts Meaning Units Appeared in	Number of Comments the Meaning Unit Appeared in
Organization Comments	Organization Comment (OC)	15	21
	OC: Photo	1	1
	OC: Posts Link	8	11
	OC: Thanks Supporters	4	4
	Organizational Reply (OR)	66	248
	OR: Corrects Commenter	12	14
	OR: Thanks Commenter	36	81
	OR: Thanks Commenter for Donating	7	48
	OR: Answers Question	32	55
	Commenter Questions Organization	45	61
Commenter Questions	Reply Questions Organization	13	13

As mentioned previously, 7.98% of total comments contained some form of a question; however, only 11.7% of comments were directed at the organization. Questions included asking

about what the organization is or isn't doing, for details on legal actions, how to help, where to find more information, adoption questions, and questioning the organization's actions. These comments, when seen and responded to by the organization, were a method commenters used to open direct dialogue.

**Table 9**

*Organization Response Frequency*

Organization	Organizational Comments	Organizational Replies	Total	Percentage*
American Wild Horse Advocates	1	23	24	8.92%
Government Horse and Burro Adoptions	0	2	2	0.74%
Wild Horse Information Center	2	49	51	18.96%
Protecting America's Wild Horses	8	76	84	31.23%
Western Wild Horse Sanctuary	0	21	21	7.81%
Local Horse Management Association	10	77	87	32.34%

\* Rounded to nearest hundredth

### **Commenter Demographics**

One striking pattern which emerged from this study was that 88.89% of those commenting were female. Of the remaining 11.11% of commenters, 6.72% were male, 3.24% were comments from the posting organization, and 1.15% were individuals whose gender could not be determined based on information available. Table 10 details the commenter's genders and number of comments per gender. Commenter's gender was determined through examination of their name and profile photo, if no definitive determination could be made based on these two items, the commenter was classified in the gender undetermined category.

**Table 10***Commenter Demographics Across Six Organizations*

	Female	Male	Gender Undetermined	Organization
Comments	5,472	389	77	21
Replies	1,900	170	18	248
Total	7,372	559	95	269
Percentage of Total*	88.89%	6.72%	1.15%	3.24%

\*Rounded to the nearest hundredth

**Misinformation Concerns**

Another emergent theme was organizational posts and audience comments which referenced concerns about misinformation, also sometimes termed “fake news”. A total of 44 comments and 2 organization’s posts mentioned “fake news” or misinformation. This represents 0.53% of comments and 1.47% of the organizational posts examined. Of the comments, 6.82% mentioned “fake news”, 36.37% mentioned misinformation, and 56.81% were replies to other commenters mentioning misinformation. Comments regarding misinformation included those which referenced general misinformation, misinformation from the organization, and misinformation from other commenters.

Comments which referenced general misinformation, as opposed to accusing the organization or an individual of spreading misinformation, typically discussed the impact of misinformation. Paige’s comment to an organization which supports contraception provides an example of this: “Hysteria by a misinformed public is never helpful, but calming their fears is”. Paige’s comment recognizes the impact of misinformation by first addressing how those who are misinformed can behave in a way which is not helpful to the cause, and then recognizes the efforts of the organization to quell misinformation.



In contrast to Paige's comment, replies about misinformation most frequently accused other commenters of perpetuating misinformation. An example posted on a pro-management organization's Facebook post by commenter Jane was: "You have been proven wrong time and time again. Stop spewing incorrect information on the GHBA's posts". Jane's comment directly accuses another commenter of spreading misinformation and calls for them to stop. Her comment provides an example of comments and replies which directly accuses the organization or another commenter of spreading misinformation. Paige and Jane's comments provide information on how commenters interested in the wild horse and burro controversy are recognizing and addressing perceived misinformation.

### **Discussion**

The five major themes of this study, organization's posts, audience discussion of the issue, organization-audience interactions, commenter demographics, and misinformation concerns, demonstrate how organization and audience communication regarding the wild horse and burro controversy both concur within and expand upon Scheufele's (1999) framework for political communications. The themes align with Scheufele's (1999) framework as the media and audience frames are both present and, in most cases, distinct entities. The findings expand upon Scheufele's (1999) framework as they exemplify a new dimension of communication where the audience interacts with the media instead of simply consuming it due to the current nature of social media, specifically the Facebook social media platform.

While the findings illustrate the five unique themes and subthemes which emerged from the data, this discussion will recognize the interconnectedness of the themes by condensing them. After condensing all interconnected areas, the areas which will be discussed include: action-oriented responses, emotional responses and organizational posts, government/management

responses and organizational posts, organization-audience interaction, commenter demographics, and misinformation concerns.

### **Action-Oriented Responses**

The wild horse and burro controversy is an issue where action has the potential to influence change. The finding of action-oriented responses as a trend demonstrates that social media is being used in this issue as a platform to discuss action and activism. Valenzuela (2013) also found evidence that digital platforms are being used to facilitate political action. However, it is hard to determine the extent to which discussion surrounding action on social media leads to real-life action. This is demonstrated in some comments that suggested someone, but not necessarily the commenter, should do something, deflecting responsibility. These comments and other behaviors which don't demonstrably contribute to the cause would be categorized as "slacktivism". The term slacktivism was developed to illustrate the disconnect between awareness and action on social media (Glenn, 2015). Social media users who are deemed to participate in slacktivism take part in low-risk and low-investment activities, such as watching a video or liking a post, without creating impact towards social change (Glenn, 2015). Lee and Hsieh (2013) examined slacktivism in conjunction with subsequent actions taken by those participating in it to determine if the potential to influence change existed. Lee and Hsieh (2013) determined that it may be possible to improve the frequency of action by keeping requested subsequent actions clear and closely related to the participant's original instance of slacktivism. These findings are likely transferable to social media, and by keeping the perceived-costs of participating low and related to an initial low-risk investment of slacktivism, an organization may be able to encourage its followers to move from slacktivism to activism.

## **Emotional Responses and Organizational Posts**

Appealing to viewer's emotions is an established approach that attempts to influence the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Joffe, 2008). Similarly, instances of negative or positive emotional responses in this study were closely tied to variations in organization's posts. A major pattern which emerged from the findings of this study was that detailed Facebook posts induced more focused and intelligent conversation than posts which provided a limited amount of information and directed the audience to an external link.

While some of the organization's posts were positive in tone, many reported negative news, such as how many horses died in a roundup. Negative news was often accompanied by potentially upsetting images, most frequently horses being rounded up with a helicopter. Posts reporting negative news with a brief description, often accompanied by a link and upsetting photo, had higher instances of negative emotional responses than posts which provided more detailed information. Posts which reported negative news in a more detailed fashion directly on Facebook, as opposed to relying on an external link, led to more productive and focused discussion. In these posts, audiences may still be upset about negative news, but instead of simply commenting about their personal anger, they frequently thanked the organization for their work despite difficult circumstances. One organization which exemplifies this pattern of posting detailed information being connected with a more positive and understanding response from the audience was the LHMA. In summary, the emotional response of the audience was highly dependent on the communication strategy and amount of detail provided by the posting organization.

The connection between emotional reactions of the audience and organization's posts also connects back to the concept of agricultural literacy. Kovar and Ball (2013) begin their

definition of agricultural literacy with “an agriculturally literate population is able to see beyond emotional pleas and make informed decisions on [agricultural] these issues” (p. 167-168). It was discovered that many of the organizations used appeals to emotion as part of their strategies to engage their audience. While the extent of the audience’s agricultural literacy regarding the management of wild horses can’t be determined conclusively without further information, inferences may be made based on the variation in comments. For example, if one comment to a post expressed negative emotions while another commenter wrote a more detailed overview of the issue, as they understand it, it can be theorized that the commenter who provided detail beyond expressing emotion may be more agriculturally literate. The connection between the type of comment (emotional or providing specific detail) and the commenter’s level of agricultural literacy is an area where the opportunity for further research is present.

### **Government/Management Responses and Organizational Posts**

While distinct subthemes in the findings, government and management related responses are closely interconnected as it relates to the discussion of the wild horse and burro controversy. This is because the management of wild horses is handled by the U.S. government, and desired changes must be made through interactions with the government. Like emotional responses, the audience discussion of government and management related issues was closely related to the organization’s posts. For example, an organization’s posts regarding roundups would elicit comments related to roundups. Scheufele et al.’s (2007)’s model of agenda setting, the correlation between emphasis placed on an issue and the importance which the audience attributes to the issue, can explain this finding. In most cases, there was a strong connection between the topic of the organization’s posts and the audience’s concern or opinion regarding certain types of government action or management practices. The exception to this is when

organization's posts were not detailed and didn't communicate a clear concern, audience responses to these posts contained greater variation. Using Scheufele et al.'s (2007) model of agenda setting, organizations may be able to compose information in a way that influences the importance the audience places on an issue.

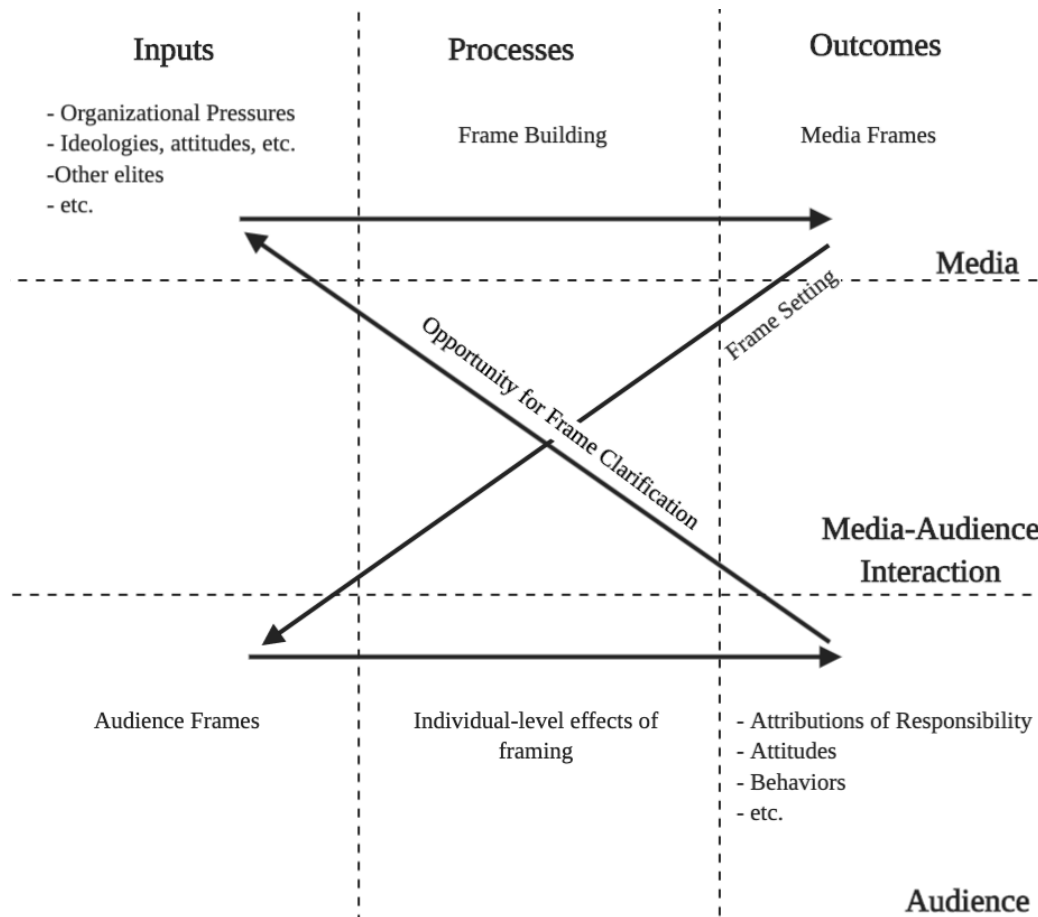
### **Organization-Audience Interaction**

Organization-audience interaction is one unique characteristic of social media communication which did not exist when Scheufele (1999) authored his framework for political communication. Scheufele (1999) recognized the interconnected relationship between the media and its audience, but this relationship must be expanded upon as social media allows for direct discussion between the media and audience. To illustrate this, Figure 3 shows Scheufele's (1999) original Process Model of Framing Research (Figure 1) updated to include media-audience interaction as a central dimension of the framing process.

Additionally, the diagonal arrow which connects the outcomes of the audience frame to the inputs of the media frame has been changed from "journalists as audience" to "opportunity for frame clarification". As the findings illustrate, organizations engage with their audience with varying frequency to answer questions, give thanks, and clarify misconceptions. The word opportunity was chosen as organizations may select to respond to all, some, or none of the audience's comments. Frame clarification refers to the unique opportunity this dialogue gives the organization to clarify their post without having to compose an entirely new post. The arrow follows the same direction as the original "journalists as audience" arrow as these media-audience interactions will serve as an input and influence the media's frame building process when composing a new social media post.

**Figure 3**

*Updates to Scheuefele's (1999) Process Model of Framing Based on Findings*



### **Commenter Demographics**

According to Clement (2020), 44% of Facebook users were female and 56% male as of January 2020. Therefore, the finding of an 88.89% female audience base for organizations related to wild horses and burros is considerably outside the range of the Facebook norm. While it is not possible to explain this finding in the scope of data gathered, the nature of the topic may provide a clue to this trend. Kruse (1999) acknowledges that women are consistently found to play a central role in the animal right's movement. This is supported by the fact that 5 out of the 6 organizations examined are female-led. The individuals behind the sixth organization, GHBA,

could not be determined from information available. The majority female leadership will have an impact during the media's frame building process, as described by Scheuefele (1999), which will impact the media frame. Gaardner (2011) provides insight to this trend by citing the socialization aspects of gendered economic structures as being a plausible explanation for this trend of female involvement. Gaardner (2011) states that women tend to be more involved as primary caregivers for pets and make up the majority of volunteers at animal rescue organizations, exposing them to animal rights related literature and thought. Additionally, Gaardner (2011) explains that gender-roles which associate males with strength and emotional distance may dissuade men from participating in animal advocacy due to the social cost of involvement.

### **Misinformation Concerns**

While the percentage of overall posts and comments which made references to misinformation and "fake news" are not overwhelming in terms of their percentages, the fact that these concerns are being voiced is significant. These concerns illustrate that misinformation on social media is not just a concern of companies like Facebook and Google, which have made policies against it, but misinformation is also a concern to individuals consuming social media (Wingfield et al., 2016). The finding of misinformation concerns also support Pratley's (2018) and Roberts et al.'s (2016) findings that "fake news" is not limited to purely political discussions but can also extend to a variety of industries, including agriculture.

An additional finding from this study is that most followers agreed with the organization's opinions on the management of wild horses and burros. This consensus creates echo chambers within the groups, where audiences are exposed only to content they agree with (Garimella et al., 2018). According to Törnberg (2018), there may be a connection between echo chambers and the viral spread of misinformation. In the case of the wild horse and burro

controversy, the potential for misinformation was most commonly seen through the perpetuation of information which isn't backed or disputed by scientific evidence but is convenient to the plight of the wild horses and burros. One example of this is stating that wild horses prevent wildfires. As others in the same echo chambers agree with this information, it spreads, despite a lack of evidence to validate the claim.

### **Recommendations for Research and Practice**

The major themes which emerged from this study highlight opportunities for future research into effective issue-related social media communication. First, examining the type of comment (e.g. emotional or detailed) in combination with the level of the commenter's agricultural literacy is an opportunity for future research which could provide greater depth to the understanding of social media communication and assessing audience reactions. Future research is also warranted to examine the finding of a majority (88.89%) of commenters being female. Finally, there is a need for detailed and research-based approaches for effective communication for organizations. Areas for potential research could include the impact of images, videos, links, post length, and post frequency. Compilations and use of discipline specific social media tool kits, as seen by Garcia et al. (2016), for a wider variety of industries could help improve the quality of information on social media and thus combat misinformation and issue-related literacy concerns.

The themes which emerged from this study highlight important considerations for organizations to make when communicating via social media. My first recommendation is that organizations should supply as much information as is necessary directly on the social media platform instead of relying on the audience to follow external links. The findings indicate that the more information provided to the audience directly on social media yielded a more focused



comment section when compared to organizations that provided brief descriptions with more information on an external link. My next recommendation is that organizational requests for audience action should communicate a low perceived-cost of participation to the audience. The request for action should be closely related to the post and require a low-risk investment, like sending a pre-written email to a person in power. This could help to transition audience members away from slacktivism and into activism, with the potential to encourage at least a portion of the audience to increase their involvement through eventual higher investment. A final recommendation is that organizations consider the frequency of posts, especially those requesting audience action. Posts should be frequent enough to keep the audience interested and engaged, but not so frequently that the audience becomes overwhelmed and withdraws interest. By providing detailed content and strategic, low-risk calls to action, organizations should see an improvement in the audience's literacy regarding the issue being communicated as well as in participation in calls to action.

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